WITH OR WITHOUT *GRINGOS*

When Panamanians Talk about the United States and Its Citizens

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Abstract: In local and informal contexts, Panamanians talk about the power of the United States and describe its citizens in multifaceted and complex terms. In this article I examine those views as they are articulated in informal urban settings in Panama City and in conversations with middle-class Panamanians. My respondents evaluate the US-Panama relationship and discuss individual North Americans with realism, reflecting a graceful but critical spirit of forgiveness toward their more powerful ally. A broader awareness of US colonialism in the past is combined with a pragmatic acknowledgement of opportunities in the present and the desire for a more equal relationship in the future. I argue that the opportunity to voice unreserved opinions about powerful Others can potentially empower local actors.

Keywords: anti-Americanism, *gringos*, Panamanians, politics, power, stereotype, US-Panama relationship

Since its foundation as an independent state, and for the remainder of the twentieth century, Panama had been connected with the United States by a close relationship that reflected the interests of the latter and constrained the sovereignty of the former. This unequal relationship had been shaped by mutual or diverging interests and periods of tension and conflict, but also by cooperative co-existence. In the twenty-first century, as previously, the continuous presence of US citizens in this small Central American country and the overall impact of US international politics have inspired the general population in Panama to think both critically and constructively about the United States and its citizens. In this article, I examine those views in detail, paying special attention to how the US-Panama relationship is perceived at the local level.

In everyday life, I argue, underprivileged local actors mark out their own sphere of discursive agency by discussing powerful Others in familiar terms

Social Analysis, Volume 54, Issue 1, Spring 2010, 52–70 © Berghahn Journals
doi:10.3167/sa.2010.540104

with spontaneity and confidence and within the safety of intimate social environments (cf. Herzfeld 1997). In local conversations in Panama, the most widely recognized 'powerful' nation on Earth and its citizens are cut down to size and discussed as equals to other smaller nations and ethnic groups. The information exchanged in these conversations contains local knowledge about wider political processes and their perceived effects on the periphery. This very rich information provides anthropologists—observers and interlocutors in these conversations—with an opportunity to indulge in thick ethnographic description. However, as Sherry Ortner (1995) has aptly recognized, anthropological knowledge about local resistance is limited by an apparent lack of ethnographic perspective and, I would add, detail. The ethnography presented in this article attempts to makes a small contribution toward remedying this problem.

An anthropological approach that prioritizes local interpretations of international politics can help us to appreciate the complexity of local resistance and the empathizing tactics—"victories of the 'weak' over the 'strong'" (de Certeau 1984: xix)—that are sometimes embedded within it. For example, when my respondents in Panama decide to see particular North Americans in a favorable light, they sharply separate interpersonal relationships from international politics. In these cases, particular US citizens are evaluated in nuanced and complex terms as concrete individuals, who might or might not comply with stereotypes and whose responsibility about more widespread inequalities is diffused by the misinformation of the media and the politicians. Conversely, when my respondents intend to criticize the uneven relationship between Panama and the United States, they invert and neutralize North American power through irony, stereotype, or metaphoric equivalence (see Brown and Theodossopoulos 2000; Fernandez 1986; Sutton 1998), comparing, contrasting, and collapsing the reputation of their powerful ally within familiar and secure conversational contexts.

I explore these themes ethnographically, paying particular attention to Panamanian perceptions of the United States, its people, and its politics. I have traced these perceptions as they emerged in discussion with middle-class Panamanians, mostly residents of Panama City, in conversations that took place in everyday contexts—cafés, restaurants, taxis, or simply in the street—between 2005 and 2008. I have relied on structured and unstructured interviews and life narratives, but most importantly on the systematic recording of dialogues, short verbal exchanges, and spontaneous comparisons of the Self with Others that transpired while following the everyday rhythm of life, often while my respondents and I were busy working on unrelated projects. I have treated this information—which is usually ignored by political commentators of grand-scale politics—with respect, and I have tried to acknowledge its sociological significance.

When Panamanians talk about the United States and its citizens, they express divergent opinions, sometimes critical and at other times surprisingly forbearing (considering pre-existing post-colonial inequalities). I explore these opinions first in a section that examines the stereotype of the *gringo* (the generalized North American)[1] and then in a section that presents the empathizing

tactics that allow my respondents to evaluate North Americans as individuals, with virtues and failings like themselves. Following this, I focus on the US-Panama relationship as this is considered in local contexts, specifically, its colonial dimension in the past and its perceived inequality in the present. I also present Panamanians' own assessment of anti-Americanism in Panama. In a final section, I contextualize the discursive directions that emerge in terms of the analytical reflections of my own respondents, giving them a further opportunity to explain the basic sociology of Panamanian pro- and anti-American attitudes.

A Brief Sketch of the US-Panama Relationship

The involvement of the United States in Panamanian politics started in the nineteenth century, when Panama was a province of Colombia. In the middle part of that century, large numbers of North Americans, who were seeking to reach California and make their fortunes in the gold rush, traversed the Panamanian isthmus on the inter-oceanic railroad (see Morgan 2006). During that time, the United States (alongside other world powers) pursued the dream of constructing a canal in Panama, despite an unsuccessful attempt by the French at the end of the century. To circumvent the authority of the government of Colombia, the United States encouraged and supported Panamanians to declare their independence in 1903, spurred by the hope of exercising direct influence over the nascent state. The completion of the Panama Canal in 1914 was a triumph of engineering and an early but assertive demonstration of the US's global power (see McCullough 1977; Parker 2007; Sibert [1915] 2008).

The United States took firm control over the newly founded nation, establishing its presence "in perpetuity" (McCain 1937: 144) on the Canal Zone, a narrow strip of land along the length of the Panama Canal that cut the country in half and was effectively US territory. Successive Panamanian governments, disgruntled with this severe compromise of Panama's sovereignty, attempted to renegotiate their relationship with the United States in a series of treaties signed by the two countries between 1903 and 1999. With the rise of Panamanian nationalism in the mid-twentieth century, a critical approach toward US interventions in local political life became a vehicle for negotiating a Panamanian national identity (LaFeber 1978; McPherson 2003). In the context of this discourse, the canal was conceived as a 'natural resource' (LaFeber 1978: 28; Liss 1967: 4) that had been appropriated by foreigners, and the United States was portrayed as a neocolonial and imperialist power, taking advantage of smaller nations.

A US military invasion in 1989, directed against the regime of the Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega,[2] caused serious civilian casualties but, surprisingly, was met with relatively limited opposition, due primarily to Noriega's unpopularity (McPherson 2006c: 203; Weeks and Gunson 1991). A decade earlier, in 1977, the then presidents of Panama and the United States, Omar Torijos and Jimmy Carter, signed a treaty that initiated the gradual return of the canal and the Canal Zone to Panamanian sovereignty. Eventually, in 1999, the United States surrendered complete control of the canal to the government of

Panama, an event celebrated as a symbolic victory of the Panamanian people over external domination. Since then, the anti-American rhetoric of the late part of the twentieth century has lost its original charge, although it occasionally re-emerges in the context of contemporary US interference in Panamanian politics, or as a critique of the inequality caused by US-led economic investment in the country.

Nowadays, many in Panama still see the future of their country as closely dependent on, or partially constrained by, the United States. The return of the canal has encouraged Panamanians to think about their country independently of bilateral US-Panama politics (Reynolds 2008) and even to explore relations with other emerging world powers (Siu 2005: xvi, 37). Most importantly, the return of the canal has provided Panamanians with the prospect of forgiving US colonial transgressions that occurred in the past and investing constructively in their relationships with individual American citizens in the present. For example, an emerging influx of affluent US migrants, who buy properties and reside permanently in Panama, provides Panamanians with new opportunities for daily interaction (McWatters 2008). But economic inequalities that continue to emerge bring back the narratives and experiences of the past. This is because Panamanian historical consciousness has been shaped by a sustained critical engagement with US politics and interventions, as these have affected local political life in previous periods. In this respect, and in terms of the wider process of ethnic identity construction that took place during the twentieth century, the United States has been, from the point of view of Panamanians, Panama's most significant Other.

Of *Gringos* and North Americans

It is not difficult to start a conversation in Panama about the *gringos* or the *norteamericanos* (North Americans). The *gringos*, everyone will agree, are a familiar sight, and many Panamanians, including those living in fairly inaccessible locations, have had some encounters with them. There is less agreement, however, about the exact significance of the term *gringo* (fem., *gringa*) (see also McPherson 2006b: 31–32), which is used to describe white, European-looking travelers or residents. When asked to provide a more exact definition, the majority of Panamanians will narrow down the inclusiveness of the term to English-speaking North Americans—for the most part, to citizens of the United States. Canadian citizens are sometimes subsumed in the same category, but the stereotypical *gringo* is a person who comes from the United States. The image associated with this term, some Panamanians further explain, has additional racial and socio-economic dimensions, according to which *gringo* stands for any rich, white foreigner.

As per this more refined definition, a *gringo* can be "a person who came to Panama with lots of money to rest or invest" or "a person who always thinks of his own interests." This wider category of rich *gringos* can potentially include individuals who can speak fluent Spanish and are not 'completely foreign',

such as US expatriates or permanent residents of Panama of North American descent. Here, the level of connection with an Anglo or Hispanic culture can determine the categorical boundaries of the term. Fluency in English or Spanish, for example, or even one's country of education and lifestyle preferences can be used as potential criteria to define a *gringo*. From this point of view, somebody can start behaving like a *gringo* and adopt *gringo* manners. In practice, however, and although 'anomalous' individuals who cross categories exist and are recognized, in everyday conversation Panamanians use the term *gringo* generically to refer to all US citizens.

It is also fair to note that, in some cases and in certain contexts, the word *gringo* is used with a welcoming and friendly attitude. This is usually when Panamanians know the particular *gringos* very well, when a relationship of trust and familiarity has been previously established, or when the *gringos* in question are self-ironically applying the term to themselves (thus encouraging a similarly intimate use by their Panamanian friends). "Interestingly," argues Sheldon Liss (1967: 2), a historian of Latin America, Panama is "one Latin American nation where the term *gringo*, as applied to Americans, is often an endearing figure of speech." Although I would hesitate to subscribe fully to such positive terms, I cannot fail to notice that there are many occasions in everyday life when the epithet's derogatory connotations become less important. In these instances, the stereotype is used, as many Panamanians explain, simply as a convenient shortcut—"like a nickname" (*como un apodo*).

When I started fieldwork in Panama in 2005, and a year before I started systematically exploring the usage of the term *gringo*, I disputed its application to myself on several occasions. Taking the narrower, *gringo*-as-equivalent-of-North American definition for granted, I explained to my interlocutors again and again that I was really a European, born in Southern Europe, where people often maintain a critical predisposition toward the politics of the Northern European powers and the United States. I was not a *gringo*, I would point out, but Greek (*griego*). Ironically, as I later discovered, the most scholarly etymological definition of the term alludes to *griego*, taken to signify the generalized foreigner, the speaker of a language that is difficult to comprehend (equivalent to the English phrase "It's all Greek to me").

A great number of Panamanians with whom I discussed this topic do not recognize this etymological definition. They offer instead alternative etymologies, the most common of which proliferates in other Latin American countries as well and draws attention to the blending of the English words 'green' and 'go'. 'Green' here stands for the uniform of the US Army (which was brown before the 1940s and blue in earlier periods) and 'go' for the unwelcome reception of the US Army by most Latin American nations. In Panama, this last understanding of the term has been adapted to the local political experience, that is, the almost century-long stationing of uniformed US military personnel in the Canal Zone. "When the American were here," I was told countless times, "their uniform was green, and the people who were bothered by their presence wanted them to go." Thus, *gringo* originated from "green go *fuera*" (green soldiers go away).

It is from this particular point of view, informed by history as it is experienced locally, that we can better understand the subtle irony of the *gringo* stereotype. Situated in a marginal position with respect to power, the people of Panama have the ability, through wordplay, to cut down to size the citizens of the most powerful nation-state, to make them familiar, to caricature them, to portray them in darker or brighter light. Seen through the prism of local experience, this selective use of a stereotype can potentially empower actors deprived of opportunities, as they reassert themselves against the background of previously traumatic memories or political experiences (Theodossopoulos 2003: 183). A *gringo*, seen from the relatively secure position of one in a local and familiar context, can be nothing more or nothing less than "a miserable one who comes from the United States" (*un desgraciado que viene de los EEUU*). In this case, humor and irony are used to invert global power relations, if only at the local level (cf. Brown and Theodossopoulos 2000).

When Panamanians want to discuss US citizens in a less charged manner, they set aside the potential irony or pejorative use of *gringo* and use the more neutral alternative *norteamericano*. This descriptive term is deliberately intended to stress the fact that the people of the United States are not the only inhabitants of the American continent. This is an important point to make, because Panamanians, like other Latin Americans, are unhappy with the oversimplification by which the term 'American' has come to mean only one American nation-state. On several occasions, my respondents explained, often correcting my 'European', generalizing use of the term, that 'American' is not a synonym of *estadounidense* (United States citizen). On one particular occasion, a Panamanian friend stressed this point further in an attempt to encourage me to adopt a more accurate terminology. "You only have to remember that the people of the United States do not have a name," she pointed out. "All other nations of the Americas have names, for example, the United Mexican States or the Republic of Colombia." "The North Americans," she continued in a humorous but pointed manner, "do not have their own name. They don't have their own identity."

Talking about the United States and Its Citizens

Local conversations about other peoples and other nations have a profound tendency to oscillate between the general and the particular. Opinions about particular events and specific individuals tend to be more complex and diverse than opinions about nation-states and their representatives (see Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos this issue; Theodossopoulos 2007). In Panama, like elsewhere, this distinction is evident in the unofficial evaluations of American citizens, which are more nuanced—critical, stereotypical, but also empathetic—in comparison to evaluations of the United States and its politicians, which are mostly unfavorable and unsympathetic.

Most Panamanians are able to visualize the average North American effortlessly and spontaneously, revealing their familiarity with this particular category

of people. Even more noticeable is the skill of Panamanians at separating interpersonal relations from politics, especially when they engage in evaluations about specific people and events. This separation enables a more empathetic conceptualization of the average US citizen as a complex human being and resonates with a more general experience-based and open predisposition of Panamanians toward outsiders.

The general image of the everyday US citizen that emerges in conversation with Panamanians contains many positive characteristics. These usually focus on an appreciation of the North Americans' education, intellectual capacity, and efficiency. As my respondents explained, North Americans are "open-minded people," who "like comfort," and "prefer a comfortable lifestyle"; "they are pleasant and well-educated," "with culture," and "confident for themselves"; "they are friendly, efficient, able to produce things, inventive"; "they do everything tidy and well"; they can be "spontaneous" and "pleasant" in many respects; they often are "simple and ordinary people" (*comun y corriente*) "like us" (*igual que nosotros*). Most of these local opinions call attention to a "human" dimension of North Americans, developed in interpersonal relations, and portray a "generous" kind of people, "capable of taking care of and protecting" other human beings, animals, or the environment.

Evidently, these opinions include an awareness of potential differences within the category under examination. In this rendering, North Americans are recognized as people with "different lifestyles," "from different races and nationalities." The acknowledgement of this diversity often neutralizes the generalizing tendencies of the *gringo* stereotype by encouraging a conceptualization of North Americans as individuals, with their own very human faults and weaknesses, personal talents, strength of character, and idiosyncrasies. Very often, however, these realistic and individually inspired portraits are followed by additional remarks of a slightly more critical nature, which in turn generate broader evaluations of the 'but' variety: "The North Americans are very intelligent, but they are selfish," "they are friendly, but reserved," "with a few words they are good, but like all people, they have faults."

The most common fault that Panamanians attribute to US citizens is their frequently criticized arrogance. "They believe they are the center of the world," several of my respondents stressed. "They are narcissistic," "boisterous and overbearing." "They believe they are demi-gods." Some Panamanians emphasized that North Americans present themselves with what Panamanians perceived as superficial or misplaced confidence, while others were bothered by the North American acquisitiveness and competitive ambition, highlighting how *gringos* "want everything for themselves" and how "they want to be no. 1 in everything!" Finally, and despite the more generally perceived North American friendliness, many Panamanians described particular US citizens as "persons dry [cold] in their sentiments" (*personas secas en sentimientos*), lacking in sentimental expressiveness when compared with the everyday Panamanian.

Very often, the weaknesses of US citizens are seen as resulting from factors external to their individual constitutions; for example, many Panamanians imply that US citizens are being lied to by their government and the media. In

this respect, the opinion of a majority of Panamanians is clear: "The people of the United States," all those who are not a formal part of the establishment, are "noble" or "good" people, but "they are generally manipulated under the imperialist umbrella." According to this general point of view, "the North Americans," when it comes to politics, "do not have their own judgment." Echoing views found in Greece (see Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos this issue), Panamanians uphold the idea that the political awareness of US citizens is constrained by their long-term exposure to mass media pressure and brainwashing. Despite its critical component, this argument also contains an empathizing attitude: US citizens, like "any other people," or like Panamanians themselves, are similarly "cheated" (*engañado*) by their own politicians and governments.

Due to this flexible tactic in attributing responsibility, the faults of particular US citizens can be seen as closely connected to the liabilities of their government. For example, the arrogance or selfishness of some US citizens is a reflection of the perceived arrogance and acquisitiveness of their politicians. This particular form of reasoning provides a broad scope for discursive maneuvering, which ranges, always according to context, from empathy to stereotyping. For example, if the intention of a Panamanian is to absolve an individual North American from responsibility, that person's personal failings are attributed to misinformation (i.e., the work of the biased US media and the politicians who hide the truth from the US public). Conversely, the shortcomings of an individual *gringo* can be highlighted in a given conversation to substantiate the stereotyping of the United States as an "arrogant," "selfish," and "acquisitive" nation.[3]

A similar flexibility in their line of argument allows everyday Panamanians to express a number of positive evaluations about the United States without compromising their overall critical perspective. Many admit that the United States is a "very developed" or "fully developed" country, economically and technologically, "a place of opportunities" that encourages people "to grow, to learn new things, and to have a better life." These qualities allow the United States to be seen as a "marvelous" country, but one that is "under bad administration," with "an arrogant and abusive" government. In the accounts of most Panamanians, the dark, undesirable side of the United States is intimately connected with the actions, motivations, and decisions of unnamed US government officials and politicians, who are credited with abusing their country's undeniable power and technological superiority.

Nevertheless, there is one point on which the overwhelming majority of Panamanians agree: the United States is a country with great power—"the greatest power in the world"—but it is also a country that is misusing that power. The most typical examples of this misuse, according to the Panamanian point of view, center around the manner in which the United States humiliates other countries, primarily by intervening in their domestic policies, and the more general acquisitive or 'colonial' manner of appropriating other nation's natural resources. As I will discuss in the following sections, these evaluations resonate with a long history of US interventions in Panama's political life, a history that is taught in the Panamanian education system and constitutes shared knowledge as part of the local historical awareness.

US-Panama Relations from a Local Perspective

A long trail of treaties between Panama and the United States has shaped the narrative of Panamanian history. In the context of this background, the historical present is the time after the return of the Panama Canal to Panamanian authorities in 1999. This important landmark separates 'now' from 'before' in local evaluations of the US-Panama relationship. For many Panamanians who have experience of the situation 'before', the present looks somewhat better. "Before, we had issues with the North Americans," they make clear, "but now [that they gave us the canal], we have overcome those issues"; "our relationship with the United States has improved with the passage of time"; nowadays, it is more "united," more "positive," "improved"; "we have a change of 180 degrees." As some of my older respondents stress with a poetic tone of pride, "Now we can travel in the whole of Panama without giving a report to anyone." "Before we had a foreign flag in some parts of our country, but now we have our own flag all over Panama!"

As is often the case in unofficial conversations, completely unexpected or contradictory views emerge as interlocutors reflect upon their particular circumstances. For example, residents of Panama City who had economic links with the US military personnel and the residents of the US-controlled Canal Zone in the past have more positive recollections of the period before the return of the canal. This category of Panamanians includes merchants, restaurant and hotel owners, and their former personnel, the people who worked 10 to 15 years ago as receptionists, waiters, or more generally in the service sector. Several Panamanians from these occupational categories argue that, from a strictly economic point of view, life was better when the United States had control over the canal, since, as many admit, North Americans brought with them "lots of money." After North Americans left the Canal Zone, "life has improved in many general respects," a 30-year-old receptionist maintained, "but when *they* were here, many businesses prospered."

Reflecting from a more critical point of view, some of my respondents in Panama City compared the US-Panama relationship before the return of the canal to the present time and found significant similarities. US interventions are now more indirect, they explained, but the overall influence of the United States in Panamanian economic life is felt as strongly as before. "Through the governments of Mireya and Martín," a 50-year-old photographer forcefully asserted, "the US government continues to impose its own policies."[4] Others recognized the economic opportunities of a good US-Panama relationship but felt that the United States is getting the better share of the deal "like always" or "like before." "The relationship between Panama and the US continues to be uneven," pointed out a 22-year-old university student. "We are like brothers, but the United States is the big brother!"

In similar terms, many discussions with local Panamanians about Panama and the United States accentuate the perceived inequality between the two countries. "According to international law, the two nations are equal," explained a Panamanian schoolteacher, "but in reality they are not." "The relations with

the United States have always been unequal," added another respondent working in higher education. "There have always been interventions in our internal affairs." Very often, other, more routine indicators of power differentials are brought into the discussion. "They earn more than we do," said a local merchant. "They can come here without a visa, but ourselves, when we want to go there, we are under many restrictions," pointed out a chemist, echoing a complaint frequently raised by Panamanians with first-hand experience of US immigration controls.

As in most matters pertaining to the relationship of Panama with the outside world, Panamanians, by an overwhelming majority, remain pragmatic in their evaluations. They acknowledge both the advantages and disadvantages of the US-Panama relationship as these have been experienced in the past and are developing in the present. Drawing comparisons with the past, some of my respondents stressed that "the relationship of the two countries remains close," "primarily due to economic reasons"; "the two countries are intimately connected through lots of communication and business." For example, as many indicate, a recent free trade agreement has enabled Panamanian products to reach the United States more easily.[5] This is a "relationship of convenience," some Panamanians stress, meaning that North Americans are interested in the canal, while the economy of Panama benefits from North American commercial investments.

According to this down-to-earth point of view, the US interest in Panama lies only in the canal—nothing more, nothing less. If the management of the canal is safe and efficient, the US-Panama relationship is expected to remain positive. If there are problems with the security of the canal, the United States has the power—the entitlement, even—to intervene, many Panamanians explain, pointing out the terms and conditions of the relevant treaties. This very same pragmatism, which is reflected in the words of some Panamanians in a confident and optimistic manner, becomes more critical and pessimistic in the unofficial local commentary of other interlocutors: "If the canal does not work well, the United States will come back to take Panama," or "the United States will invade Panama once more."

Similar mixed sentiments are expressed at the local level with respect to the future of the Panama-US relationship. Some Panamanians are unsettled by what they describe as "the constant fear of US invasion," a fear embedded in their lived experiences of US interventions in the past and the fact that the conditions of the proper and efficient running of the canal imply possible future US intervention. However, other Panamanians imagine a bright future for the relationship between the two countries, although they emphasize that a precondition of good relations will require mutual respect and more equal conditions and opportunities. "If the governments of Panama are not very docile" or "if our politicians can stand up to the *gringos*," the argument goes, then "the future will provide us with new opportunities."

Opportunities, however, are also arising in the present, with significant investment of capital originating from the United States. In the post–Canal Zone Panama, US citizens are as numerous as before. Some are coming to invest in the

large-scale development projects that are taking place in the capital city, while others are interested in investing in tourism, but most are lifestyle migrants (including retirees), seeking a comfortable life in a warmer climate (cf. Benson and O'Reilly 2009). US lifestyle migrants benefit from the local service economy, enjoy private health care at more reasonable rates, and buy property at prices that ordinary Panamanians cannot afford but that are still much lower than in the United States.[6] My respondents discussed this particular category of resident *gringos* by drawing pragmatic evaluations that resemble their opinion about the Panama-US relationship in general.

Once again, my Panamanian respondents explained that there are advantages and disadvantages stemming from the increasing influx of North American lifestyle migrants. The resident *gringos* buy properties, are able to pay for services, and provide many Panamanians with jobs and some income. At the same time, however, this privileged type of migration contributes toward a general rise in the price of goods and services and makes life for the poor and middle-class Panamanians much more expensive (cf. McWatters 2008). Resonating with the conclusions drawn by several of my respondents, a Panamanian woman who works in the tourism sector summarized her opinion about elderly US migrants in the following concise manner: "Here their money has more value, and they are able to have more leisure time. They are good people who seek a peaceful and more enjoyable life in Panama. But in reality, they contribute toward the destruction of Panama's natural beauty by developing any available land, any beach, any swamp, anything. They make everything more expensive!"

Is Panama an Anti-American Country?

Despite the seemingly critical comments of respondents that I have presented so far, Panamanians, by an overwhelming majority, do not see themselves as anti-American. Even those who explicitly express their dislike for North Americans in other conversations maintain that Panamanians have always been open and welcoming to foreigners and are not anti-American by definition. As a point of comparison, those respondents who are critical of US power were astonished at the degree of pro-American feelings maintained by their compatriots. According to the majority view, Panamanians are willing to forget the injuries that they have suffered under the United States due to their generous nature, but also due to their attraction to US consumerist values and lifestyle. "In reality," most of my respondents say, "we are not anti-American" and "Panama is not an anti-American country," despite "what you may hear in the street, here or there."

In one particular discussion, three of my most sociologically inclined respondents concisely and insightfully reflected on this topic: "There is a profound ambivalence in the attitudes of the Panamanians," said Eduardo. "They criticize the North Americans all the time, but they are not anti-American!" "I think that Panama is not an anti-American country," pointed out Sergio. "The Panamanians in general are kind with strangers, and despite the fact that economic

advantages are given to the Americans, we are not xenophobes." "The most beautiful characteristic of the Panamanian people is their tolerance," Maria added. "They are very tolerant. They are not anti-anything!"

The tolerant attitude of Panamanians is recognized with some implicit respect even by those who, due to their more leftist political orientation, do not hesitate to see themselves as anti-American. A couple of respondents with passionate anti-American sentiments admitted that they are disappointed with the lack of intensity in Panamanian anti-American views. They criticized their compatriots for maintaining a conformist attitude, relying extensively on the US economy or trying to imitate aspects of the North American lifestyle. These criticisms are shared by other Panamanians, who are not necessarily leftist and do not articulate a systematic anti-American discourse. In most cases, however, Panamanian criticism of those who express pro-American attitudes is tempered with positive observations about the forgiving nature of the Panamanian people and their open door policy toward foreigners, including US citizens.

It is interesting to note that although Panamanians do not see themselves as anti-American, they expressed divided opinions when I asked an apparently similar question: "Do you think that the Panamanian people in general like North Americans?" In response to this question, a small number of my respondents argued that "most Panamanian people don't like North Americans" (or "the *gringos*") and that there are millions of people in the world who share this dislike. Others maintained that many Panamanians "like North Americans," but only because "they have money" or because "Panamanians do business with them." The majority of my respondents, however, recognized that there are two large, almost equal categories of Panamanians—those who like North Americans and those who do not—but the first group, I was told, is somewhat bigger than the second. This was often admitted with some rhetorical disappointment or, in other cases, with jokes, irony, or qualifying points, such as "most Panamanians like them, but I don't!"

Explaining Panamanian Views from Below

I have so far presented how Panamanians discuss the United States and its citizens in everyday conversation. In this section, I would like to shed some light on the complexity of these views and their contradictions. In any given conversation, particular interlocutors put forward certain arguments that, I argue, contain reflections of a sociological nature, often intended as explanations of the issues under discussion, and are informed by a wider appreciation of local social history. Instead of presenting another account of Panamanian political history as this is seen from above, I would like to prioritize here the interpretative threads provided by Panamanians themselves when they assess and put under scrutiny their own views.

The starting point in this examination is the observation of a broadly educated Panamanian friend, an architect by profession, who argued that Panamanians had always had an ambiguous relationship with the United States. The

ambiguity, he explained, lies in the fact that they often like some aspects of this relationship (or some particular characteristics of individual North Americans), but they do not like others. For example, and as I have highlighted in the previous sections, many Panamanians admire the education and efficiency of North American people or the 'developed' state of the US economy (which can potentially benefit the economy of Panama), but they are unhappy with the perceived arrogance of particular *gringos*, and the interfering, colonialist attitude of the US government.

Some of the above general themes are likely to emerge in the arguments of Panamanians when they discuss North Americans and the United States as a nation-state, but the same individuals are likely to accentuate different conclusions in different conversations, under the influence of particular timely developments or the presence of different interlocutors. The overall outcome of these conversations will eventually draw mixed portraits, both favorable and critical, of the United States and its people. Despite the fact that most conversations highlight some of the themes sketched out in the previous sections, in everyday life Panamanians exercise their ultimate right to color North Americans in any way that they like.

However, with regard to an individual's circumstances, there are some general indicators that are likely to predispose certain people to have a more positive orientation toward the United States. For example, Panamanians from the Caribbean side of the country, especially those from an English-speaking background, have traditionally been more positively inclined toward North Americans. In a similar manner, Panamanians who worked in the service sectors during the US occupation of the Canal Zone are more likely to share fond memories of the economic prosperity associated with certain periods of that general era. Several of my respondents recognized these possibilities, while the most senior among them also remarked that younger Panamanians—those between the ages of 15 and 25—are more likely to have a sympathetic attitude toward the United States, as they have not experienced the difficult periods in the relationship between the two countries and the struggle of Panama to achieve complete sovereignty and reclaim the canal.

An additional, sociologically oriented explanation of the general kind was offered to me by some other respondents, who saw themselves as representing the educated but comparatively underprivileged Panamanian middle class. They claimed that most pro-American Panamanians tend to be either very rich or very poor. The rich, who are able to afford a North American lifestyle, are seen as benefiting from the economic exchanges with the United States, while the poor, like the North American poor, are presented as being easily misinformed. In this perspective, it is the Panamanian middle class, neglected by the state and impoverished by uncontrolled, profit-led development, that ideologically resists the US lifestyle and is critical of US economic colonialism.

Other local commentators accused the Panamanian elite as being the actual instigator of anti-Americanism in Panama. The richer families, I was told, educate their children in North American universities but do not encourage the education of poverty-stricken Panamanians, since they wish to preserve their

privilege. Instead, they fuel hatred for the United States among the poor, who blame North Americans for the inequality and poverty of their lives and for everything wrong that happens in Panama. In the past, I was also told, the ruling elite, following a similar tactic, discouraged the use of the English language—even among the Caribbean coast population who used English as their native tongue—in a general attempt to fortify the nationalist sentiment of the Panamanian nation. Historian Sheldon Liss (1967) has attributed the proliferation of "Yankeephobia" to the strategies of Panama's ruling class, "the oligarchy." As did some of my Panamanian respondents, Liss charges the elite with blaming the United States for the inequalities that the privileged class itself perpetuates (ibid.: 8). According to this point of view, the development of nationalism and anti-Americanism in Panama was promoted by the elite as a political strategy that directed public dissatisfaction toward the United States and its policies (cf. McPherson 2003: 92).

During the second half of the twentieth century, the national education system in Panama was directed to take a more active role in shaping the historical consciousness of Panamanian students. The relationship between Panama and the United States became the title of a history course in the final stage of Panamanian compulsory education. Textbooks that were prepared for a national audience of high school students and approved by the Ministry of Education were made widely available (see Bracho 1998; Fitzgerald 2007; Solis n.d.) and are still used in secondary education. History lessons on the US-Panama relationship have facilitated the fusion of academic and popular accounts, since individual students and teachers have had many opportunities to discuss the history of the two nations as a lived history.

The critical evaluation of the relations of the two countries, as promoted by national education, has encouraged the negotiation of personal identities, with respect to the history taught at school, in conversations outside the classroom. "The history of Panama as a nation-state is the history of the relations between Panama and the United States," argued an 18-year-old Panamanian, with a slight touch of exaggeration, as he reflected on his recent experience at school. Other respondents, who are now in their early twenties, remembered, with a feeling of weariness, having to learn about the many tedious US-Panama treaties that dominated history as it was taught in school. Older respondents, as shown in the previous sections, treated the same topic in a more critical manner, pointing toward the colonial dimension of US involvement.

Not surprisingly, a good number of middle-class Panamanians are well prepared to discuss the colonial dimension of the US-Panama relationship in the past and the post-colonial character of contemporary relations. Reflecting upon the history that they learned at school, they contend that "from the end of the nineteenth century, the US government has become an empire" (*un imperio*). Some Panamanians point out the colonial dimension of US power in a rather dispassionate manner, while others, usually men over the age of 30, prefer to make more dramatic statements, such as "the United States is an empire that plunders the people and takes their resources" or "the *gringos* want to take possession of Panama" (*quieren apoderarse de Panama*). Although some will

dispute the proposition that Panama has been a colony of the United States, many acknowledge that their nation was "like a colony" (*como una colonia*) in the past, making sure to add that this is no longer the case.

After discussing the topics above, comparisons between the past and the present often merge with more analytical reflections that echo, to a certain extent, the conclusions of historians. There is mention of "colonial conditions" in previous decades, of the resistance of the intellectuals and the Panamanian middle class, of the failure of North Americans to dominate the spirit of the Panamanian people. The surrender of US control of the canal in 1999, as I have described in previous sections, is treated as a landmark that separates Panama's semi-colonial past from the uncompromised sovereignty of the present. The same landmark is used to explain discrepancies in the contemporary Panamanian perceptions of US power, colonialism, and the US-Panama relationship. The older generation of middle-class Panamanians, guided by their experience, a politically dictated school education, and an enhanced historical awareness, see themselves as more critical of the United States than the post-1999 generation. "We were never like Puerto Rico," they conclude rhetorically. "We never wanted to be a star in the North American flag."

Conclusion: Forgiving Gracefully (and Critically)

In the context of everyday life, many people in Panama discuss the United States and its citizens in a critical but also accommodating manner that reflects an awareness of the colonial character of US-Panama relations in the past, the unequal power differential in the present, and the possibility of a more rewarding relationship in the future. Local actors in Panama City talk about individual North Americans with spontaneity and confidence, recognizing positive and negative characteristics and drawing complex portraits of individual personalities. The stereotype of the *gringo* is sometimes called into use to cut down to size the citizens of the most powerful country in the world and thus to empower local critics, who reassert their undeniable right to discuss more powerful Others as equals (cf. Brown and Theodossopoulos 2000).

At the same time, however, and despite their criticisms of the United States, Panamanians employ empathizing tactics that allow them graciously to forgive the United States and its people. One such tactic involves separating assessments of particular US citizens from judgments about the politics of the United States, a strategy that opens the way for constructing more friendly representations of individual *gringos*. Even stereotypical depictions of North Americans, as they are creatively put to use in everyday conversations, can offer the possibility of a more personal and intimate relationship, in which a *gringo* can be seen as a person with both virtues and failings. Here, the stereotypes, with their metaphoric qualities and selective irony, provide opportunities for concretizing "the inchoateness of subjects within frames" (Fernandez 1986: 52) and making powerful and distant Others more approachable. Then, when dealt with in more familiar terms, individual North Americans can be exonerated with

regard to the objectionable political choices made by their government and the misinformation propagated by the US media.

Through discursive tactics, such as the ones described above, diverse personality traits, including many agreeable characteristics, can be attributed to citizens of the United States in typical Panamanian conversations. Less favorable, however, are evaluations about the government of the United States and its official politics. When concerned with this, local unofficial discourse highlights the arrogance of US international policies and pays special attention to the US practice of meddling in the internal affairs of Panama and other countries. Here, Panamanians take their cue from the negative effects of the many interventions of the United States in the political history of Panama, which are recounted in Panamanian history textbooks (see, e.g., Bracho 1998; Fitzgerald 2007; Solis n.d.) and form an important part of Panamanian historical awareness.

Since the middle part of the nineteenth century, both academic and local commentators agree, the United States has undeniably influenced political developments in the Central American isthmus. Some authors, such as Ovidio Diaz Espino (2004), would not hesitate to refer to Panama as *El país creado por Wall Street* (The Country Created by Wall Street).[7] I am generally unhappy with this reductionist, top-down approach to explaining history, which underestimates the contribution of ordinary, everyday Panamanians in determining their own destiny. The United States did not create the Panamanian nation; rather, "Panama birthed itself, and the country's nineteenth-century history supports such a claim" (Reynolds 2008: 20). There are, however, some Panamanians, who, like Diaz Espino, recognize the non-transparent negotiations of various selfishly motivated officials and the interest-led incentives of US politics as these have unraveled themselves in the context of the US-Panama relationship. With their critical remarks, as these are articulated in local conversation, they reveal the hidden nature of those politics and "decertify power's claim to transparency" (Sanders and West 2003: 16–17).

In this and many other respects, my Panamanian respondents are adamant critics of perceived US colonial attitudes. At the same time, however, they deny the proposition that Panama was a colony of the United States, that is, a colony in the strict and legally binding sense of the term. In local contexts, Panama has always experienced a certain degree of autonomy. Without a powerful landed class in the countryside, the merchant aristocracy in command of political power in the capital had "no direct economic control over the population it dominated" (Zimbalist and Weeks 1991: 7). The United States partially filled some of the resulting vacuum of power, especially in the early years of independence, during which period Panama was "like a colony," as Panamanians put it, or had a colonial status, as academics judiciously describe the situation (Gjording 1991: 22; Zimbalist and Weeks 1991: 157). During that time, no important decision could be made without US approval, my respondents explain, "not until 1979," when President Torijos renegotiated the return of the canal.

The year 1999 is another important landmark when considering the US-Panama relationship, as it separates the time 'before' from the time 'after' Panama assumed total control over the canal. During the time before, Panamanians

"were repeatedly reminded of their dependent status" (Howe 1998: 178), but after the United States surrendered the canal, many of the injuries done to Panamanians by the United States began to heal. Remarkably, and considering the degree of US interference in Panama's political life, contemporary Panamanian attitudes toward the United States and its citizens appear lenient and forgiving. They resonate with a moderate version of anti-Americanism, described by McPherson (2003, 2006c) as conservative, restrained, and ambivalent—an anti-Americanism that has not challenged the interests of the commercial elite and has maintained the outward-oriented spirit of Panamanian political culture, which has always been open to global influences and opportunities.

In the informal contexts of everyday life, local actors in Panama may express a like or dislike for an individual North American, and they may argue that they do not necessarily see themselves as anti-American. At the same time, however, they reserve the right to criticize explicitly the United States and its politics when they see fit and appropriate. It is in such terms that local conversation about the mighty United States provides peripheral actors with a sense of interpretative agency and control over the greater processes of power that surround them. US authority is contested, disapproved, and brought down to earth, and in this respect local conversation about the United States and its citizens empowers the local interlocutors, providing them with an opportunity to contemplate a future with or without *gringos* and to forgive critically the United States for its arrogance, colonial attitude, and misuse of power in the past. From this point of view, which is communicated with confidence at the local level, Panama is a small country in the periphery of power, but a nation-state in the very center of the Americas and the world.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Carlos Fitzgerald, Danae Brugiati, Lambros Efthimiopulos, and Giorgos Efthimiopulos for their help during fieldwork, their stimulating discussions, and the overall inspiration that they provided me. I would also like to thank the participants of the Colonialism and Development seminar series at the University of Bristol, where I presented an earlier version of this article.

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Notes

1. In this article, when I use the terms *gringo* and 'North American' without further specification, I adopt the Panamanian convention of referring to US citizens, not Canadian citizens.
2. For a short, but beautiful, mythico-historical portrait of Noriega's rise to power, see Kane (2004: 178–180).
3. Inspired by the work of Heider (1958), social psychologists have studied the intricate tactics of behavioral attribution and have uncovered attributional biases, such as the "fundamental attribution error" (Ross 1977), in which the individual is blamed rather than the situation, and the "self-serving bias" (Miller and Ross 1975), in which we blame our failures on external factors while taking credit for our achievements. When evaluating the attributes and motivations of other ethnic groups, local actors appear to use the strategic potential of these attributional biases in a conscious and flexible manner in order to validate particular arguments in the context of particular conversations.
4. Mireya Moscoso was president of Panama from 1 September 1999 to 1 September 2004. Martín Torrijos was president from 1 September 2004 to 1 July 2009.
5. The agreement referred to is the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) (see also Kalny this issue).
6. This is an aspect of foreign investment activity promoted by the Panamanian government to augment foreign income.
7. The title of a book published previously in English as *How Wall Street Created a Nation* (Diaz Espino 2001).

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